

The Scimitar GTE has enjoyed Royal patronage for some years, and has steadily grown in stature to that of classic. Reliant ceased production of the car more than two years ago — and Middlebridge Engineering are about to re-introduce a totally re-engineered car within the same set of clothes. What is more, the Princess Royal is set to become one of their first clients. Tony Quinlan reveals the background to the car's return.

The Scimitar GTE motor car, variously described as Gran Turismo, Sports, Fastback Estate, Executive and later "Classic" is a car that refused to die.

Pronounced dead by the economic recession of the mid '80s, it was laid gently to rest by Reliant in 1986, a luxury motor that no-one could afford. Previous owners, clamouring for a replacement of their aging classic, must all have been saying their prayers in the right place, for they can now find hope at Beeston, Nottingham, where the once-unbelievable is taking place.

It is rare that any marque of motor car, once discontinued, can ever be revived — especially after a full two years absence — to live again in its former glory. However, the "Middlebridge Scimitar", gleaming in its superb factory finish, stood as a "once-again-living-legend" at the '88 N.E.C. Motor Show. Still retaining its classic lines, but with over four hundred and fifty modifications to upgrade and improve every facet from paint to performance, economy to excellence, the Scimitar is once again "on offer".

This is a car that developed from what many may see as an unusual background, since Reliant are better known for their economical three-wheelers. The shape of their future was beginning to take its form as far back as 1956 when Reliant introduced Glass Reinforced Plastic bodies. GRP bodies were soon recognised as the medium for high strength at an acceptable weight and moulded grace, difficult to achieve by any other conventional method.

In the eight years which followed, much expertise was gained at Tamworth in plastics production, prior to the birth of their first

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Sports Coupé. This was a lively, four-wheeler, two-seater sports with a Ford 2.3 litre engine and transmission, hosting the attractive name of "Sabre". That car was the forerunner to the "Scimitar GT" venture.

The now-classic "Estate Car" (Reliant works terminology) appeared in 1969 with 3 litres of Ford Essex power increasing the performance from the earlier car. Improved appointments, handling and reliability earned the model its GTE title. Gran Turismo Estate. Making the car longer and wider in 1976 further improved comfort and handling, settling the car into the style that has greatly endeared it to its many followers since.

The GTC appeared in 1980, "C" for convertible indicating a soft-top open sports version. Accepted as an equally successful design from its debut, the GTC was produced in relatively smaller numbers, its rarity making it much sought-after today and assuring its maintenance of value.

The recession of the mid '80s gave fewer people the resources to purchase expensive GTs for "second car" status: this worldwide belt-tightening slowed the production of all cars in the luxury class. As demand came to less than one car per week it was found uneconomical to continue production facilities, and with regret Reliant ceased manufacture of the Scimitar models in 1986.

During the mid '80s it had become apparent to Mr. Kohji Nakauchi, a Japanese businessman with a passion for British sports cars, that the numbers of small British companies previously hand-crafting the "best of British" was in serious decline, many cars considered classics becoming things of the past.

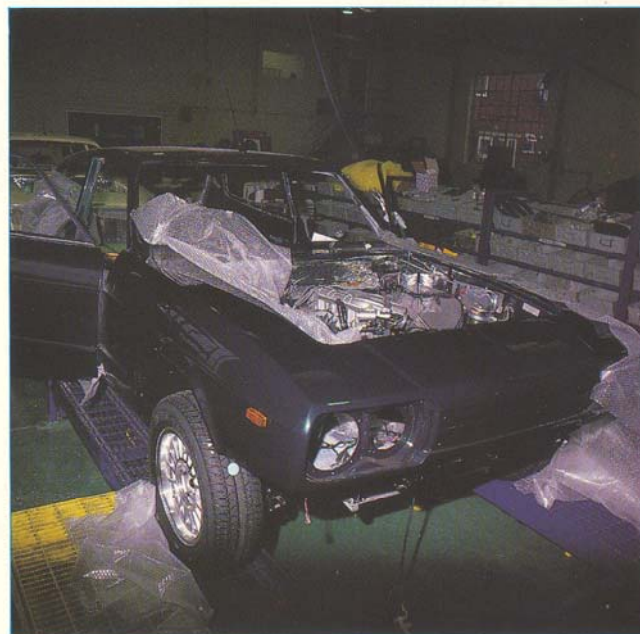
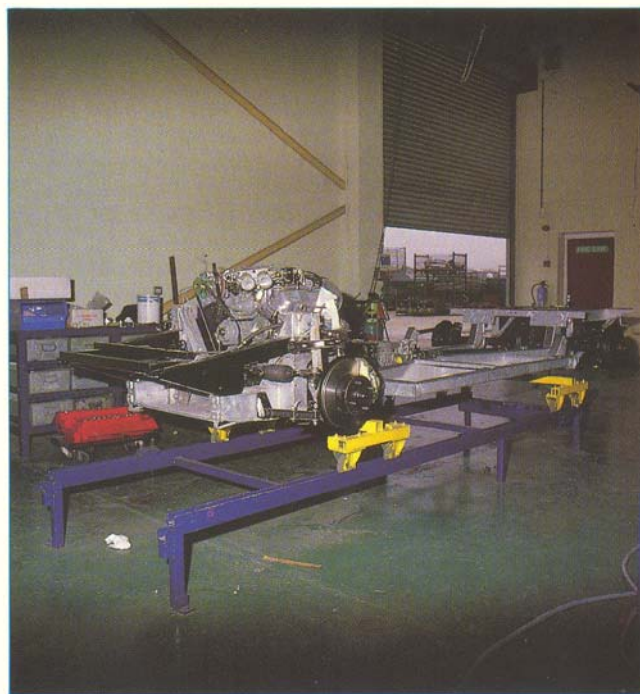
Mr. Nakauchi decided to set up a company to restore outdated, classic and collectable cars. The consideration of starting the restoration scheme in Japan was mooted, but thankfully decided against because it was felt that British craftsmanship still had a great deal to offer that could be lost with a Japanese base. In 1986 Middlebridge Engineering, Milton Keynes, was founded by Mr. Nakauchi to restore and export cars for Japanese enthusiasts. Momtane Engineering, the pre-war Aston Martin specialist, was acquired in 1987 to add skills to the endeavour.

Further progress came in 1987 when Middlebridge Racing was established from within the company, maintaining the high standard and offering a very real service to the sport, especially to Japanese racing teams competing in Europe. It was also a natural step for Middlebridge to find interest in an opportunity

to obtain the manufacturing rights of Reliant's Scimitar, giving the chance to supply new, rather than be limited to refurbishing only old models. Following protracted negotiations Middlebridge purchased the rights for production of both GTE and GTC cars and then set to and provide the means of manufacture.

Middlebridge, under the control of Group Chairman Mr. John Nursey, financed the building of a complete purpose-built factory at Beeston to house yet another company, Middlebridge Scimitar Limited, an autonomous company in the hands of Peter Boam and John McCauley, two very dedicated Joint Managing Directors.

It is readily evident that the much esteemed Scimitar has a healthy future ahead. Even before one new Scimitar had rolled off the re-established assembly line there were close to five hundred enquiries for the car, and at least 150 firm orders. These figures are, of course, pre-N.E.C. Motor Show. Delivery is given as from three to six months, but delivery time is bound to go out as orders rise for something that is still British and best, thanks to the foresight of people like Kohji Nakauchi and John Nursey. ►



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◀ "How does the 'new' Scimitar compare with the 'old' Scimitar?" ask a host of "previous owners" and almost every show stand visitor. With over 450 modifications to the new car it seems strange to say that the cars differ very little in anything that you can readily see. Remember, however, that improvement and design of even the most lowly motor car component continues at quite a pace today, and the item so familiar just two years ago has often changed out of all recognition when you come to replace it, a problem only too readily found on many of today's current motors. So what chance a car out of production for two years?

Small suppliers of minor brackets and parts may no longer exist, components may not fit where they used to. Many items are technically improved and the new manufacturer wants to offer only the best and most suitable equipment. So changes are inevitable, a nightmare to control and yet kept to a minimum for a purist and the Department of Transport alike, if lengthy trial and test is to be avoided.

The car dimensions are unchanged, millimetre for millimetre they are identical, the body contours following the same graceful sweep that they ever did. Of course they must do, for Reliants still make the basic bodyshell in the same mould as before. There are years of expertise in body lay up at Reliant's Tamworth factory and Middlebridge are the first to admit that they are the ones that know a thing or two about the GRP Scimitar GTE 6B bodyshell. Obviously Reliant is the best supplier to complete the contract.

At Middlebridge a close inspection on receipt of the car bodies takes place and careful hand finishing of even the most minor blemish is carried out. The perfect body on its sub-chassis is

treated to a coat of etch primer, followed by a two-pack primer and finally three coats of colour lacquer, with the obligatory hand finishing between coats and controlled drying in a direct-fired drying oven. This results in the most superb paint finish seen on any standard production car for a long time — and this on a car body that does not corrode.

Attention to corrosion resistance is evident in the chassis preparation also. The complete chassis is hot-dip galvanised after fabrication, and even the petrol tank retaining straps are stainless steel bands. After all, it would be embarrassing if after five or six years your rot-proof car lost its petrol tank in traffic. Petrol tank capacity is unchanged at twenty gallons, so don't shout "fill her up" jovially at your garage man without around £35 in your back pocket, although this could get you an incredible 600 miles if you are the careful kind.

At the front end of the naked chassis on the assembly line is the expected Ford power plant and transmission. The "old" Scimitar worked its way through a select few of Ford's products current at the time, from the 3.0 litre Essex, gutsy but breathless at the top end, to the later 2.8 litre "Cologne" motor, a more responsive twin choke carb job in the later models. Today's "new" Scimitar utilises "Uncle Henry's" latest "state of the art" V6 unit, the 2.9 litre "Scorpio" fuel injected engine.

Reliant's figure of "up to 120 m.p.h." from the 2.8 litre motor was reckoned by some owners as slightly understated, but then you know what owners are and some will claim more from the 135 b.h.p. produced. There are as yet no performance figures for the Middlebridge Scimitar, nor is it likely that any claim to maximum speed will ever be seen in their advertising, for our masters at the DoT look with disfavour on any company likely to



suggest that a car should be sold for its ability to exceed the national speed limit. However, those lucky few that may fancy a quick spin on the Autobahn may be able to find the cutting edge of performance from the 150 b.h.p. at 5700 revs very acceptable – well it can't be slower than the earlier car, can it?

The earlier car's transmission carried four gears and an overdrive at 0.78:1 with a rear axle ratio of 3.54:1. The latest mills drive through a five speed box, fourth gear at 1:1, and as in most top gears, the fifth gear doing the overdrive work at a ratio of 0.825:1 still with an axle of 3.54:1 as before. Reasoning that since the Scorpio offers an extra bunch of b.h.p.s at around some 500 revs higher, then performance must be increased and the "overdrive" ratio being fractionally lower than previously it must all be happening with less strain on the motor.

Performance characteristics are increasingly controlled by more sophisticated equipment. The Bosch Jetronic electronically controlled fuel injection unit, with cold start enrichment and controlled warm-up period, goes a long way to fulfilling the promise of increased speed and acceleration with improved fuel consumption. See, you can still have your cake and eat it.

That's just a smattering of the difference to be found. Other things are a stainless steel exhaust system as standard, redesigned rear light cluster, Range Rover door handles and latches instead of the earlier Morris Marina items (that's got to be upmarket!), Bilstein dampers, redesigned suspension by specialist Roddy Harvey-Bailey, this to cope with the car's improved acceleration and weight redistribution, car colour under wheelarches instead of black finish, cast alloy 6J x 15 wheels as standard from an Australian supplier (no, it isn't known if the wheels are fitted upside down). A changed angle

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to propshaft to reduce vibration is another visible change. Antiphon metallised insulation to reduce running noise and vibration, also reduced radio interference. The list goes on and on with more changes than a washing line on a windy day.

What is really surprising in view of all this change is that it still looks like the same car.

Reliant designed a legend, but Middlebridge is shaping it to an unsurpassed standard, that would not have been bettered in the days when beer was tuppence a pint and carriages were gilded for the nobility, but with the advantages of today's technology.

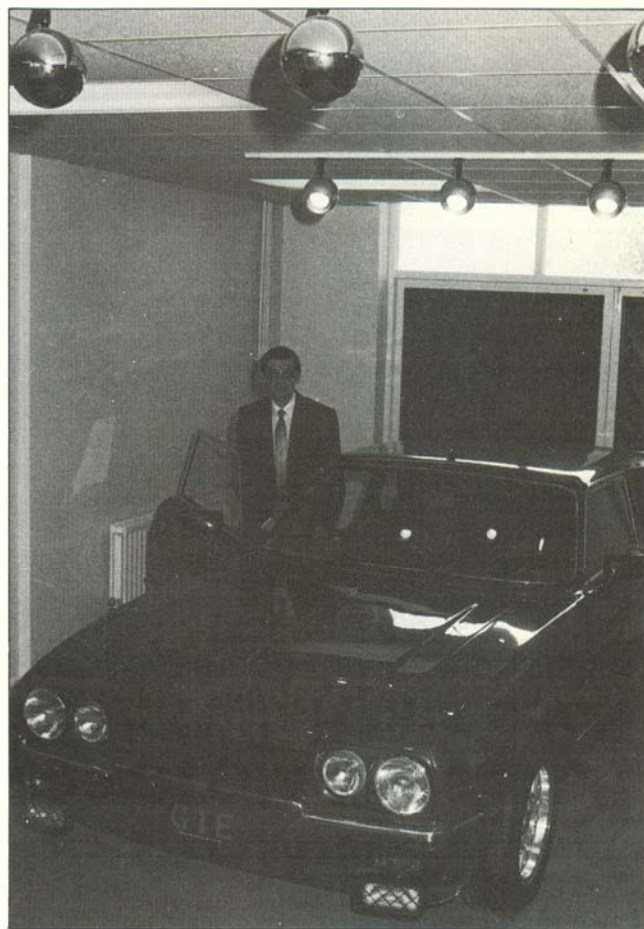
So many items usually seen only as extras are included as standard equipment. Quite apart from the equipment previously listed there are a host of little things that tend to make motoring luxurious – twin speed wipers, four speaker stereo radio/cassette, tachometer, rear window wash/wipe, four headlamps, delayed action courtesy lights, twin horns, engine compartment light, illuminated door guard and puddle lamps, electrically operated windows and tinted windscreen. In fact, if you can think of it, it's probably already screwed into place just where it should be.

The only optional extras left to offer appear to be automatic transmission, seat trims and more colour choices than are good for you. One colour finish in particular deserves a mention. Listed as a Pearlescence Colour, it is similar to, but far superior to, any metallic paint job. Having a dark appearance it is at first difficult to assess the true colour, pearlescence green having a blue sheen in some light and deep green in others. The viewing angle also affects the appearance, the car colour sliding seductively around the body contours as the car or viewer

moves, giving the uncanny impression that the true car colour is somehow "just around the corner".

Such is the car and colour, seen nearing completion, being prepared for the Princess Royal. With the past experience of no less than six "original" Scimitars, it will be interesting to hear what the Princess feels about her latest acquisition, the Middlebridge version. Having sampled the works demonstration/prototype car in a tyre-thinning outing, she was obviously sufficiently impressed to place an immediate order. Others, wise or lucky enough to get their names early in the order book, will also be enjoying Scimitar motoring before the close of 1988.

The open GTC car may be expected in 1989, following hooded trials. No, not a secret test, but the earlier GTC was felt to be lacking in security and facility of the soft-top. The Middlebridge car can be expected to have an electric motored hood with an almost "one finger" fixing to facilitate those "wind in the hair"



days and yet offer better security than the average canvas-covered car. Details of the GTC are not yet available for release – could this be the four hundred and fifty first modification? Time will tell.

Taking around 300 man-hours per car to complete (over forty of them on the paint finish alone), the current output of Scimitars is three per week. This figure is expected to increase early in 1989 and an option on land adjacent to the present works may be taken up sooner than originally intended. Not surprising when considering the Scimitar's potential in Europe, Japan and the United States, all designated outlets for British built excellence.

What price this paragon of craftsmanship, with its all-embracing specification, you ask? Well, you will have change out of £24,000, but only just. Not unreasonable when you consider the quality of hand-crafting and the few alternatives in this class of classic car.